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AUTHOR LaVista, Daniel J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In 1969, the College of Lake County (CLC) was founded in Grayslake, Illinois, as the result of a grassroots effort by area residents. To ensure employee input into decisions during the formative years, CLC established the All-College Senate (ACS), an employee forum featuring representatives from every employee group who met regularly to discuss issues of concern. By 1987, the number of college employees had grown too large for the ACS, and a new model was proposed featuring four groups: the Classified Senate, Specialist Senate, Faculty Senate, and Student Senate. The four Senates work together through the Governance Coordinating Council (GCC), charged with the organization of special committees to serve college interests and the facilitation of communication between the four Senates and with the college administration. Within the Senates and the GCC there are four commissions focusing on areas of specific interest: the Curriculum Commission, the Facilities Use and Planning Commission, the Professional Growth Commission, and the Student Life Commission, each of which advises a designated administrative office. This model encourages the participation of employees and students in the formulation, implementation, and review of college goals, policies and procedures, and the campus community is generally well-informed of the issues affecting the college. The CLC governance system has provided considerable feedback and generated ideas and programs, including the establishment of a new system for student evaluation, research and planning of a mentoring program, and a review of admissions requirements. (MAB)

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Daniel J. LaVista
Jean V. Kartje
M. Cheena Wade
Steven McCarthy
Sally M. Ericson

College of Lake County
Grayslake, IL 60030-1198

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
North Central Association
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COLLEGE OF LAKE COUNTY

Office of the President

19351 West Washington Street
Grayslake, Illinois 60030-1198
(708) 223-6601
FAX: (708) 223-9244

A Senate is a Senate is a Senate...?

In 1969, the College of Lake County was built on the prairies north of Chicago, minutes from the Wisconsin border. Developed as the result of a grassroots effort by area residents, the college was founded and matured through the teamwork and energy of many people contributing their best thinking and efforts to living out an educational dream.

To structure employee input into decisions during the formative years, the college established an All-College Senate. This forum had representatives from every employee group who met regularly to discuss issues of concern. It was very stimulating to have faculty and staff, custodians and vice presidents sitting in the same meeting, struggling with the same issues. But it was also balanced in favor of academic issues and concerns. Faculty members, skilled in public debate and group processes, could easily sway an argument or demand attention to curricular issues over the less heady suggestions for community development, partnerships with business and industry, or working conditions which concerned other employee groups.

In 1987, the college had grown from a handful of employees working on card tables in one temporary building to over 1000 people scattered over two campuses, one educational center, and fifty extension sites in the district. The All-College Senate had lived out its usefulness, and governance had to be re-structured to keep pace with a changing institution.

A group of ten people from various employee groups was charged to examine different governance structures and to propose a model to meet the distinctive needs of the College of Lake County. This group ultimately recommended a system composed of four groups--the Classified Senate. Specialist Senate, Faculty Senate and Student Senate. A fifth body--the Governance Coordinating Council (GCC)--was charged with the organization of special committees to serve college-wide interests, and the facilitation of communication between and among the four Senates and with the college administration. It was decided that the senate structure was not appropriate for administrative and professional staff members. Since the proposed governance system was designed to have an equalizing effect for those individuals involved, it was envisioned that faculty, specialists, classified staff and students would deal with issues and concerns as colleagues within the new senate structure. The hierarchical nature of the administrative and professional staff system was viewed by some as potentially inhibiting and maybe counterproductive to the open debate that was seen as the basis of governance at the college. In lieu of a formal senate, the college president developed monthly opportunities for administrative and professional staff to discuss ideas and college-wide initiatives.

With the Senates and the Council, four Commissions focus their attention upon specific areas of particular interest. These are the Curriculum Commission, the Facilities Use and Planning Commission, the Professional Growth Commission, and the Student Life Commission. Each Commission advises a designated administrative office.

Each Senate functions under its own constitution and by-laws based upon the unique characteristics of its membership. The Faculty Senate, for instance, calls for representatives from various academic divisions; the smallest employee group, the specialists, selects Senate representatives from nominations received from the group as a whole.

The Senates develop their independent annual agendas and themes, and share their focus through the Governance Coordinating Council. They also are informed of board initiatives and administrative actions through the GCC. This link allows each group to provide feedback or become involved in issues which are raised and primarily addressed by other groups. Therefore, when the students saw a need to revise the faculty evaluation system, the Student Senate leadership asked for a place on the Faculty Senate agenda. While the faculty took the lead in developing the model for the evaluation process, the Student Senate representatives were kept informed and regularly attended appropriate meetings to express their ideas and solicit additional student reactions to the developing process. Further, when the Classified Senate began to promote a cooperative program in which special education high school students would gain work experience at the college, the project was able to solicit early reactions and support.

The roles and responsibilities of the governance system are clear. The model encourages participation of employees and students in the formulation, implementation and review of college goals, policies and procedures. Each Senate is encouraged to raise and consider issues and opportunities which affect its unique relationship with the college or the college community as a whole. Senates are not, however, involved in specific matters covered in collective bargaining contracts or with grievances, which are handled through a separate system.

At the College of Lake County, the faculty and the custodial/grounds segment of the classified employee group are organized in a bargaining unit; other classified employees and the specialist employees are not represented by a union. The latter groups, however, are offered an opportunity to provide input into the Board of Trustees' salary and policy decisions influencing their compensation, benefits and work conditions through an adhoc committee. This group works for a short period of time each year, and makes its recommendations to the president. In addition, the group is given a formal opportunity to speak directly with the Board of Trustees regarding their compensation concerns. While this system has provided some good dialogue, the current Classified and Specialist Senate Chairs are examining alternatives which might move the organization of salary and policy discussions outside of the governance system.

The Senate structure of the College of Lake County is recognized as only one branch of the decision-making process. Policy decisions are rightly the purview of the Board of Trustees. Operations are managed through the leadership of the college administration. The Board and administration value the thinking and experience of employees and students who operate in different organizational systems and thus have varied--and valuable--perspectives on issues which affect the college. This respect and nurturing of the governance system in an organized fashion, and at all levels, is essential to the success of the system.

Students and employees who are active in the governance system recognize that they have meaningful opportunities for input into the college's decision-making process. The system is considered efficient, because each Senate may elect to become involved in those issues which are important to its constituency. There is also a "bad news/good news" perception related to the efficiency of the system. In the words of one Senate leader: "By giving more employees (and students) that meaningful input, the decision-making process is slowed down and in that sense is less efficient. Still, when decisions are made with all of the employee (and student) input that now exists, there is general consensus. Additionally, employees are well-informed of the issues and do not believe that the decision was made only by the college's administration." In this view, the time taken to make decisions certainly is justified in light of the involvement of many people.

There are other positive aspects for people who become involved in college leadership through the governance system. Communication with members of other employee groups and direct interaction with the college president are often cited. The assurance that people affected by decisions are represented at the beginning of the decision-making process is another. Finally, the fact that all members of the college community have an opportunity for a voice in decision-making, whether they elect to use that voice or not, is exciting. However, the governance system, like most good processes and programs, requires constant attention and hard work to maintain its success.

And, to be sure, the College of Lake County governance system has provided some good feedback and generated some wonderful ideas and programs over the past few years. A short list of accomplishments must include:

- The review of a proposal to develop a new campus in the district.
- A review (and rejection) of a merit pay concept.
- The establishment of a new system for student evaluation of instruction.
- The research and planning for an employee mentoring program spearheaded by specialist employees and the application of the quality circles concept for classified employees.
- The review and acceptance of new admissions and degree requirements for the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees.
- Annual review of the academic calendar and governance system.
- Structured opportunities for social interaction and new employee orientation.
- The involvement of the college as a worksite for students in the special education district "Work Crew" program.

The success of the College of Lake County governance system is founded in the principles embedded in the introduction to the governance handbook. This handbook contains the constitutions of the various senates, and outlines the rights, responsibilities, functions and philosophies which underlie this system for input into decision-making at the College of Lake County. The introduction reads:

> Governance is a communication structure which allows good ideas a place to surface; the solicitation of multiple opinions or feedback in an efficient manner; and a forum for the consideration of various concerns by a broad and representative group. The governance system at the College of Lake County is built upon the knowledge that college students and staff value the opportunity to be actively involved in the decision-making processes of the college. Further, it is believed that multiple groups formed around similar interests, experiences, and concerns will most competently and completely address the varied issues of the college. In addition, the governance system endorses action based upon mutual respect, good faith, and commitment to the best interests of the college as a whole.

Daniel J. LaVista, President
Jean V. Kartje, Executive Assistant to the President
M. Cheena Wade, Faculty Senate Chair; Instructor in Biology/Health Sciences Division
Steven McCarthy, Specialist Senate Chair; Technical Writer/Special Events Coordinator
Sally M. Ericson, Classified Senate Chair; Senior Clerk, Technical Processing, Learning Resource Center

College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL, 60030-1198

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